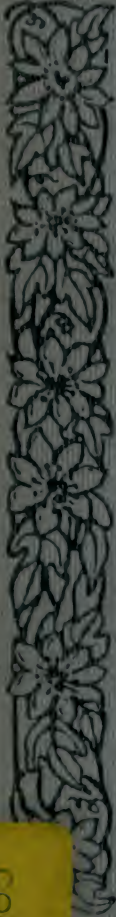




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THE JOY OF THE LORD

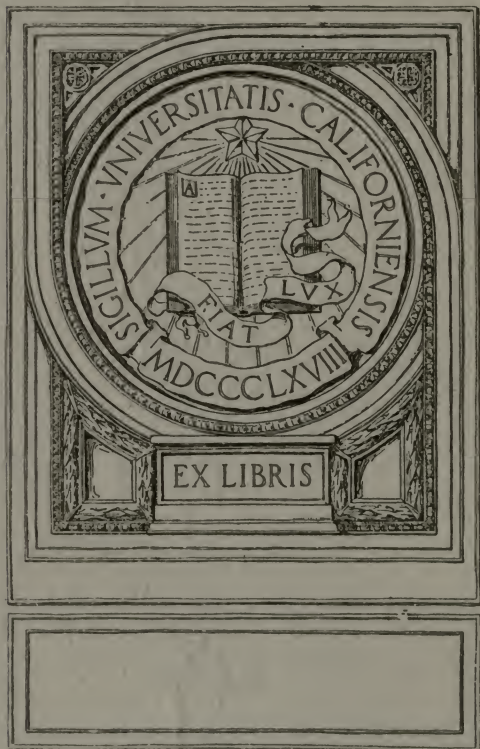


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THE JOY OF THE LORD

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THE
GIRL
WHO
GAVE
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BREAD



While we are feasting at our own table we must remember those who are hungry outside, and send portions to them.

THE JOY OF THE LORD

BY

J. R. MILLER

*Author of "Making the Most of Life," "The Master's
Friendships," "Upper Currents," etc.*



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FOREWORD

FAR more earnestly than we know does God want us to be happy. It grieves a true human father to see his children unhappy. Our heavenly Father is pained and disappointed when his children on the earth are discontented and anxious, or when they do not rejoice. This little book is a call to joy, to Christian joy, and to joy that will make joy in others.

J. R. M.

PHILADELPHIA, U. S. A.

THE JOY OF THE LORD



JOY is the highest attainment of life. It comes of perfect living and is marred by imperfection. It is music without a note of discord. It is motion without a trace of friction. It is health without the slightest sickness. It is pleasure unalloyed.

Says William George Jordan, "Happiness is the greatest paradox of Nature. It can grow in any soil, live under any conditions. It defies environment. It comes from within; it is the revelation of the depths of the inner life as light and heat proclaim the sun from which they radiate. Happiness consists not of

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having, but of being; not of possessing, but of enjoying. It is the warm glow of a heart at peace with itself."

Joy is deeper than happiness. Happiness is the fruit of good hap. Strictly it is the outcome of fortuitous happenings, of favorable circumstances. Joy is independent of circumstances. It dwells in the heart, a fountain which never fails. Happiness laughs when the sun shines but grows sad when clouds gather. Joy sings on in all weathers and in all experiences.

Joy is the ideal of Christian life. God is happy; we cannot conceive of him as unhappy. As he is love so he is also joy, and his joy, like all his attributes, is infinite and eternal. Only once in the Bible is God said to sing, and then it is in his love for his own. "He will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest

THE JOY OF THE LORD 3

in his love; he will joy over thee with singing." The thought is exquisite in its meaning. God's joy never fails. He is never dismayed by calamities. He is not disturbed by convulsions. It was said of Christ, "He will not fail nor be discouraged." Life's mysteries break our joy, for we cannot understand their meaning. But there are no mysteries with God, and therefore his joy is never dimmed.

To grow toward God's likeness and become more and more filled with his life, is to grow in joy. It would seem that not many even of those who are followers of Christ reach the life of joy to which the Master calls them. How many even of godly people are never cast down! Our Christian faith claims that we never should be discouraged, never should lose our gladness. But how many

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of us live up to this profession? Yet should we not do so? Is God not able to help us to rejoice always? If it is our privilege and our duty to attain a joy that never shall lose its song, is God not able to help us to reach this height? We say he never requires of us an impossibility. "Give what thou commandest," was the prayer of one of the Fathers, implying that everything God asks us to do we can do through his help. Surely it is not too hard for God to enable us to live a life of joy.

This is not a New Testament lesson only; it is taught also in the Old Testament. The ancient festivals were full of song and gladness. On the most joyous of them all, the feast of tabernacles, they made the coverings of branches so thin, so open, that the stars could be seen through them, suggesting

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Joy sings on in all weathers.

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that nothing should ever hide the stars from our eyes. It was in a great festival of Old Testament times that this lesson of joy received one of its most impressive enforcements. It was after the return of the captives and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. The law had been read by Ezra and the reading produced weeping. "All the people wept, when they heard the words of the law." God's word is not intended to make people sad. Just why it produced this effect that day we are not told. Perhaps the people had not heard the law read for a long time and it proved painful reading because it reminded them of their sins. The law showed them the holiness of God, with its severe whiteness, and as they looked into the mirror they saw their own faults and imperfections and the vision alarmed them. This grieved

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them, made them ashamed, and they wept.

But the weeping was not pleasing to Nehemiah. Sadness was not the effect he wished to see in the people. It was not in harmony with the day. "This day is holy unto Jehovah your God; mourn not, nor weep." The day belonged to God, and he does not want day of his stained with tears. Sorrow is always sacred to God. He looks upon it with compassion. He enters into it with sympathy. Pain and trouble in his children appeal to the heart of God with wondrous directness. We know that he is never indifferent to any sadness.

But the weeping of the people in this case was because of their sins. Is it not right to grieve over wrong things we have done? We know that penitence is always pleasing to God. In Lalla Rookh

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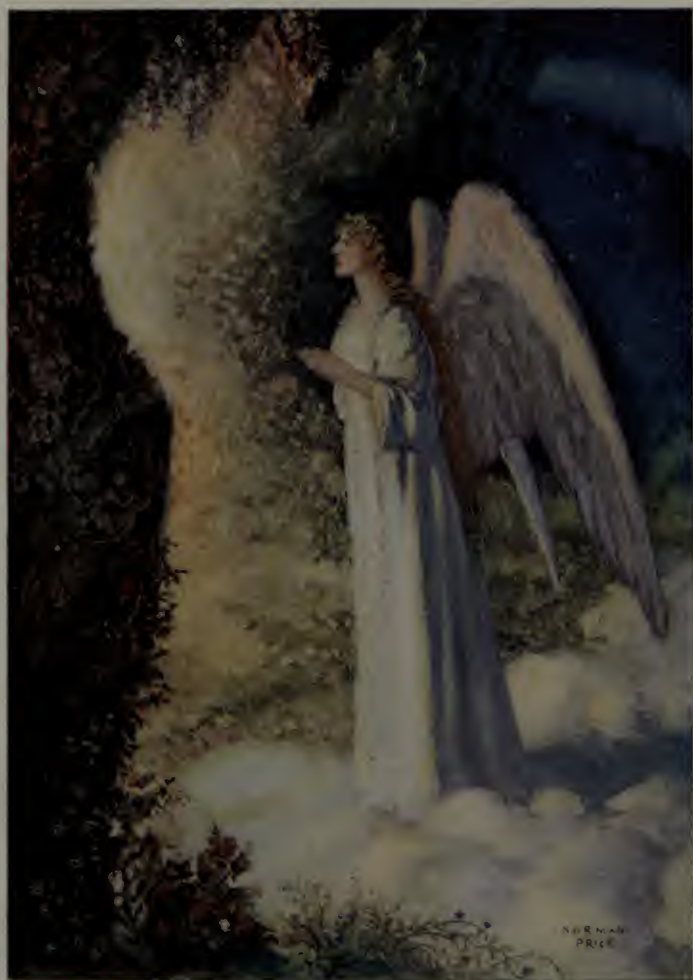
the banished Peri was told that when she brought to heaven's gate the thing on earth that was dearest to God the door would open and she would be readmitted. Again and again she came with things she thought precious, — with the last drop of blood of a patriot dying for liberty, with the farewell sigh of a lover, — but the bar was not lifted till she came with the tear of a penitent. The teaching of the Bible is the same. "Thou delightest not in sacrifice. . . . Thou hast no pleasure in burnt-offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise." There is no more precious thing on earth than a tear shed in sorrow for sin. God loves such weeping because it tells of a heart returning to him.

Yet the grief of the people that day

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was not approved by their teachers. It was not beautiful, they said. It was not in keeping with the spirit of the day. A great festival was in progress and joy only was appropriate. "This day is holy unto Jehovah your God; mourn not, nor weep." There seems to have been something in their sorrow which was defiling. We remember that when the sons of Aaron had offered the strange fire and died before the Lord, Moses forbade any exhibition of grief over their tragic death. "Let not the hair of your heads go loose, neither rend your clothes." Any expression of grief in the terrible circumstances would have appeared to be a complaint against what God had done. They were not, by word, act, or look, to show anything but the most perfect submission to the divine judgment. These men had disobeyed God and had been stricken down

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Again and again she came with things she thought
precious.

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because of their sin. There must be reverent and complete acquiescence even in the crushing grief. Besides, the priests were engaged in acts of divine worship which must not be interrupted even by the most bitter experiences of sorrow. Their service in the tabernacle was holy unto the Lord, and anything that would break into it would be sin. Duty must go on in the midst of deepest grief.

Nehemiah this day stilled the noise of the people's weeping and called them to enter into the joy of the occasion. "This day is holy unto Jehovah your God; mourn not, nor weep. . . . Then he said unto them, Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto him for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye grieved; for the joy of Jehovah is your strength."

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A day devoted to the Lord should be a glad day. It is a day full of the presence of God, and the presence of God should not make us sad. It should not inspire dread and terror. There is nothing in God to make us fear or to cause us to grieve. God is love. He is not our enemy; he is our friend. He does not cherish thoughts of anger toward us, but thoughts of peace. It does not distress us to meet a human friend who has in his heart peace and good will toward us. A day with such an one would never sadden us. We would not spend it weeping. It would seem strange indeed if when we enter our friend's presence we should break out into wailing. The presence of God is sunshine; it is brightness. It hides no dangers. Its every influence is joy. It should inspire joy.

Some people are indeed afraid of God,

THE JOY OF THE LORD 11

but it is because they have wrong thoughts of him. A woman said "I am afraid of God, but I love Jesus Christ, and have no fear of him." This was because she misunderstood God. God was terror to her because she thought of him as only anger, justice, fury. She thought of God only as an avenger. She thought of Jesus as mercy and love. She supposed he had come to take us out of the hands of God and to save us from his wrath. She hated God, but loved Jesus Christ. Yet this is not the truth about God. It was God who loved the world and gave his Son to be its Saviour. God and Christ are one. Christ is God revealed in human life. Christ is the mercy of God. God is our Father, having in him all tenderness, all compassion, all goodness. It is only when we misunderstand God that we can be afraid of him. We cannot weep when

12 THE JOY OF THE LORD

we are in the presence of God if we have the true thought of his gracious love. Our sorrow will be swallowed up in the joy that the divine presence inspires in us.

We need to think of this when we are in grief. Perhaps the fact that we are Christians does not always mean as much to us as it should in such experiences. Do we bear pain and trial differently from the way in which the people who know not Christ do? When we have a great sorrow do we stop to think of our relation to Christ and ask how we ought to bear ourselves as his friends? Does it ever occur to us that our excessive grief may not please God, that it may mar the beauty of our fellowship with him, that we may sin by indulging it overmuch? "The day is holy; mourn not, nor weep."

We know that sorrow is sacred with God. "Blessed are they that mourn,"

THE JOY OF THE LORD 13

runs the beatitude. "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people," is God's word to the messengers of his love, whom he sends out to the sad and suffering ones of earth. To those who are in sorrow he gives the assurance, "As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you." The Bible is full of divine sympathy with human grief. When we lay our head upon it we feel the beating of a heart of infinite love and compassion. God hears our songs of joy, but he hears also the dropping of our tears and the throbbing of our hearts when we suffer. He hears the cry of the child, the groan of the oppressed, every pang of distress. It is a measureless comfort to us to know that God is afflicted in all our afflictions, that our Saviour is touched with the feeling of our infirmities.

The gentle sympathy of God with our human weakness and pain is one of the

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most marvelous qualities of the divine character and is infinite in its comfort. To know that God feels with us in our every pang, that he cares when we are in distress, brings him very near to us and makes our pain very sacred. We must not think that God is angry with our tears or forbids us to grieve. Jesus himself wept when his friend had died and when he sat with the sorrowing ones and saw their anguish. He sympathizes with us all in our pain. It is not grief he condemns or forbids, but excessive grief, grief that is insubmissive. Even the grace of God does not make our hearts less tender. It does not dull our feelings so that pain hurts us less. We do not suffer less in our sorrow because we love Christ.

One way God helps us is by making us strong to bear pain and to endure suffering. He also brings before us the great truths

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"As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I
comfort you."

THE JOY OF THE LORD 15

and facts of religion in such a way that we see how blessing and good will come to us out of pain and loss and receive the strength that divine grace imparts. Comfort is a reality — not a mere sentiment. Sorrow is not actually taken away ; it is turned into joy. Our trouble is not removed from us and our senses are not dulled and made incapable of pain. We weep still, but our tears are struck through now with the light of heaven.

We do not well, therefore, in our sorrow to refuse to be comforted. We are God's children and our Father's love includes all the affairs of our lives. He watches over us with infinite affection. When he permits us to suffer he will not let the suffering hurt us, however painful the experience may be. In all times of danger he hides us away in the secret of his love where no evil can touch us. His

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purpose always is to use pain to make us better, to purify and enrich our lives, to bring out the best that is in us. He wants us to submit ourselves in confidence and trust to his will and to accept our sufferings with cheerful spirit. "Mourn not, nor weep," is ever the message of divine love. Sadness should never be the mood of God's children, however painful their experiences. Refusing to be comforted is never Christlike.

Nehemiah marked out for the people a way of duty. Instead of giving way to weeping, when they thought of their sins, he sent them to a service that would lead them to joy. "He said unto them, Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto him for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy unto our Lord." Passive grief is not the penitence which God desires us to cherish

THE JOY OF THE LORD 17

when we have sinned. He desires repentance and then turning to him in joyful obedience. We are not to waste our time in vain regret and idle grieving, when we have done foolishly. Instead, we are to begin at once to rebuild what sin has destroyed and enter at once upon a beautiful life. A poet tells of walking in his garden one morning after a storm. There he saw a torn bird's nest lying on the ground — part of the ruin the storm had wrought. The poet had a gentle heart and began to pity the birds in the loss they had suffered. But as he stood there under the tree, thinking sadly of what had happened, he heard chattering voices above him, and looking up he saw the birds busy at the rebuilding of their ruined nest. So it should be with us when disaster has come to us. We should not waste a moment in grieving over the ruin, but should

18 THE JOY OF THE LORD

quickly begin to rebuild our palace with joy and trust. The days are holy unto the Lord, and the only way to spend holy days is to devote them to ministries of love.

That is what Nehemiah bade his people to do. They had sinned, but they were not to give a moment to grieving over their folly and evil. There was not an instant to waste. The only true thing to do was to set about the doing of their duty. First, they were to celebrate the festival in their own homes. "Eat the fat, and drink the sweet." God loves gladness. He wants his children to be happy. Worship in Old Testament days was to find its expression in feasting. Certain parts of the offerings brought to the altar were to be consumed in the holy fire, and then certain parts were to be given back to the worshiper to be eaten by himself

THE JOY OF THE LORD 19

and his family. With these portions, sacred because they had been given to God, he was to hold a feast in his own house, not a feast of revelry, but of pure joy. A holy day was not a solemn, sad day, but a day bright with joy, a festival day.

Too often, even in the Christian church, religion has been misrepresented as something severe and without gladness. Men have thought of God as terrible, not a happy friend to whom they could come with glad heart, but one before whom they could appear only with awe and dread. Children have been frightened with the warning that God saw them, and would punish them, as if that was God's chief business with them. The worship of God has been represented as observed without joy. But this is an utterly false representation of the divine

20 THE JOY OF THE LORD

character. God is love, and love is joy. He is the blessed God, the happy God. The religion of Christ is all gladness. We are taught to rejoice in the Lord. There are more calls in the Bible to praise than there are even to pray. Holiness is gladness. Jesus Christ was ushered into the world with a burst of angels' songs. His life on the earth was full of joy. He was a sufferer, but he illumined every sorrow he endured with shining gladness. He was the light of the world. His teaching was full of beatitudes, blessings.

All the highest expressions of the religious spirit are in song. The Jews here at Jerusalem were commanded to cease their weeping and in their own homes to eat the fat and drink the sweet. Emphasis was thus put upon the true holiness of home. It was there, and not in the temple, that they were to celebrate the essen-

THE JOY OF THE LORD 21

tial part of the worship. It was to be celebrated, too, as a glad family meal and not as a burdensome, solemn ritual. They were to find the gladness, not the sorrow, the sweetness, not the bitterness, the best of everything, not the worst. The day was holy to the Lord and there were not to be tears, but songs.

Another feature of the day was loving thought of others. They were to eat the fat and drink the sweet at home but they were also to send portions unto those for whom nothing had been prepared, for the day was holy. Part of the holiness is always loving service. We are never to eat our bread alone; we are to share it. "It is better to be lost than to be saved all alone," says Amiel. In Job's self-justification, when his friends had spoken bitterly against him, he says, among other things:

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“ If I have withheld the poor from their desire,
Or have caused the eyes of the widow to
fail,
Or have eaten my morsel alone,
And the fatherless have not eaten thereof ; . . .
Then let my shoulder fall from the shoulder-
blade,
And mine arm be broken from the bone.”

We may never eat our morsel alone while others are hungry. This lesson was taught thus emphatically in the Old Testament and still more earnestly in the New Testament. In the Lord's Prayer we are taught to pray not for our own bread alone, but for bread for others as well. “ Give us this day our daily bread.” While we are feasting at our own table we must remember those who are hungry outside, and send portions to them. The days are holy — all the days are holy, and no day set aside for God must be stained by selfishness.

THE JOY OF THE LORD 23

The direction that the people, after eating the fat and drinking the sweet of their feast, should send portions to those for whom nothing had been prepared was in keeping with the teaching of the Bible throughout. The poor were always to be remembered. The stranger was never to be forgotten. He who let the needy go hungry when he had plenty on his own table was severely condemned. In the New Testament the lesson was taught with marked emphasis. Generosity is a quality of all true Christian character. To think only of ourselves and give no thought to others is contrary to the spirit of Christ, which teaches us always to share our plenty with those who lack. Meanness is always condemned. Generosity is always praised. It is a large word. It has a root which means excellence, goodness. It is a word of rank.

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Its first definition in the dictionary is "nobility: the order of nobles." A Prussian order of distinction, founded in 1665, bears the name The Order of Generosity, later changed to The Order of Merit. The word was applied only to the good, the brave, the noble. Christ was generous. He had largeness of heart, magnanimity. He taught his followers to be generous. The lack of generosity in one who calls himself a Christian is a blot on his name. It marks him as unworthy. It dishonors him as cowardice dishonors the name of him who calls himself a man.

The brightest deeds that shine in the story of humanity are the deeds of generosity. History records that when Nero was dead some one came secretly and spread flowers on his grave. Dr. David Smith, in *The British Weekly*, tells of the strange devotion:

THE JOY OF THE LORD 25

Nero, the bloody Emperor, was dead ;

And Rome, like one who waketh suddenly
Out of an evil dream, lifted her head

And wondered. Presently one strong,
fierce cry

Burst from unnumber'd throats, and swelling
high,

Rang to the hilltops — the wild jubilance
Of bondsmen who had gained their liberty

After much wrong and bitter sufferance.

No voice lamented : had no heart a thought

Of ruth? Ay, as each season came and
went,

An unknown hand, belike a woman's, brought

Sweet flowers and strewed them on his
monument :

Fond tribute of a clinging love that yearned

For the dead tyrant whom an Empire
spurned.

It was a splendid generosity that strewed
the flowers on that grave. Once, perhaps,
amid all his cruelties and tyrannies the
king had done a kindness, and thus it was

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remembered. Generosity does not merely return good for good, does not merely measure its giving by what it has received. Like Christly love it blesses the hand that has smitten, it repays cruelty with gentleness, it serves most unselfishly those who have done the sorest wrong.

Generosity is the perfect flower of love. It does not think who it is that needs, but gives and serves the unworthiest. It thinks only of the fact there is one for whom nothing has been prepared and sends a portion to him that he may share love's fat and sweet.

It is this spirit that glorifies true Christmas keeping. Christmas is a wonderful day. It works miracles of love all over the world. Its feast is kept with joy and song in countless Christian homes. But the true glory of Christmas is seen in what it does among the poor, in prisons

THE JOY OF THE LORD 27

and hospitals and orphanages and refuges of all kinds, where it brings its portion for those for whom nothing has been prepared. Love is very sweet when it pours out its gifts for those who love us; but it reaches its sweetest and divinest when it brings its blessings to those who do not love us, perhaps, who will never thank us, nor remember what we have done, nor return gratitude for our kindness.

Let us cultivate the spirit of generosity, thinking ever in our enjoyment of God's goodness of those who lack the blessings we enjoy, and sending to them love's portion. Thus shall we continue the work which our Lord began in this world. Thus shall we enlarge our own hearts and the ministry of love we have been sent here to perform. Thus shall we come nearer and nearer to those who need us, and more and more able to be a blessing

28 THE JOY OF THE LORD

to them. For we never can reach others by seeking to have them love us; we can do them good only by loving them. George Macdonald says: "I know that it is by loving, and not by being loved, that one can come nearest the soul of another; yea, that where two love, it is the love of each other, and not the being loved by each other, that originates and perfects and assures their blessedness. I know that love gives to him that loveth power over any soul beloved, even if that soul knows him not, bringing him inwardly close to that spirit; a power that cannot but be for good, for in proportion as selfishness intrudes, the love ceases, and the power that springs therefrom dies."

This is a lesson we cannot learn too well, nor fix too deeply in our hearts. We sometimes forget that nothing is

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To go down from the splendour of the mountain-
top, to carry the holy light into the darkness of
the world below.

THE JOY OF THE LORD 29

given to us for ourselves alone. When abundance of blessing or prosperity in any form comes to us we may not shut ourselves in with it and use it only for ourselves. We are only God's almoners, and the good we have received we are to dispense to others who need. Peter's mistake on the Transfiguration Mount was in wanting to build tabernacles and stay there with the Lord and the heavenly visitants, keeping the glorious vision to themselves. The duty was rather to go down from the splendor of the mountain top to carry the holy light into the darkness of the world below.

Ever this is our duty when we have eaten the fat, and drunk the sweet of any blessing at our own table. We are to think of those outside who have no such blessing or favor as we are enjoying and are to send portions to them.

30 THE JOY OF THE LORD

“Bow thy head and pray
That while thy brother starves to-day
Thou mayest not eat thy bread at ease ;
Pray that no health or wealth or peace
May hold thy soul while the world lies
Suffering, and claims thy sacrifice.”

At the close of this beautiful home incident we have a word which has become classical in the Scriptures because of its far-reaching meaning. “The joy of the Lord is your strength.” The joy of the Lord is not earth’s joy, that joy which comes from earthly pleasures and earthly possessions, but the joy which comes from knowing God and from being his child. This is a joy which the world could not give and cannot take away, but which belongs to all who truly believe in God. It is a joy which is not dependent upon health or upon riches or upon human friends or upon worldly honors ; it is the

THE JOY OF THE LORD 31

joy of the Lord, and can come only from him and through his love. There are those who have it and yet are continual sufferers. Everything that is supposed to be essential to earthly happiness may be lacking and yet the heart may have joy that abides unbroken through all the pain and loss.

Some great calamity may befall a believer in God, almost hopelessly destroying his last resource of happiness in his life, leaving suffering or sorrow which it seems never can be healed or comforted, and yet the fountain of pain becomes a new spring of joy. It is said that during the siege of Sebastopol a Russian shell buried itself in the side of a hill outside the city and a spring of water burst out of the torn ground and became a flowing fountain. The weary soldiers drank of the pure, sweet water during all the siege.

32 THE JOY OF THE LORD

So the wounds and hurts of life which seem to destroy beauty and joy only open new sources of gladness.

Every Christian should have this joy. It is part of his inheritance. His heart should be filled with it. But is there really much joy of such in the hearts of those who call themselves Christians? We rejoice when all things go well with us, when we have friends, ease, money, health, and prosperous circumstances. But when we lose these happy conditions our joy departs. Having God we should rejoice though all things have been taken from us. Whatever sorrow is ours our joy should continue. Its source is in God's own heart and this fountain can never fail.

This joy of the Lord is said to be our strength. It makes us strong. Sadness makes us weak. When joy departs strength leaves us, and we faint by the

THE JOY OF THE LORD 33

way. If you would continue strong you must keep joy. No one can do his work well if he is unhappy. It is said of a great artist that he always carried a lyre when he was painting. The music inspired his art. Happiness is always an inspiration, Without it our work is never the best we could do. Joy exhilarates and inspires and sorrow depresses. Yet not all joy makes men strong. The world's joy does not. Sin is enervating. It is only pure joy that makes us strong. "The joy of the Lord is your strength."

In a marginal reading the words are: "The joy of the Lord is your stronghold." We find safety in it. It is a refuge. Sadness never is a refuge. Grief is not a shelter for us. It is full of danger. Times of trouble are times of peril. We are weak when we are depressed and disheartened. Joy makes us brave. It nerves us for

34 THE JOY OF THE LORD

struggle and for burden-bearing. We cannot be defeated while we are strong. Temptation's power over us cannot prevail while joy fills our hearts.

Joy is springtime to our lives. It pours warmth and sunshine everywhere and in the soft atmosphere all things grow beautiful. The Orientals say, "By dint of laughing the roses are opened." The life which joy inspires becomes rich in its loveliness and fruitfulness.

"There's never a rose in all the world
But makes some green spray sweeter ;
There's never a wind in all the sky
But makes some bird wing fleeter ;
There's never a star but brings to heaven
Some silver radiance tender ;
And never a rosy cloud but helps
To crown the sunset splendor ;
No robin but may thrill some heart,
His dawn like gladness voicing ;
God gives us all some small sweet way
To set the world rejoicing."

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"By dint of laughing the roses are opened."

THE JOY OF THE LORD 35

Joy puts us in the mood for service. We love others easily when we have in us the joy of the Lord. It is not hard to be unselfish and self-denying if we are happy with Christian joy. We are ready to endure any sacrifice for the sake of others if we are joyful. "The joy of the Lord is your strength." We have much yet to learn, most of us, before we become the Christian optimists we ought to be. We say we should have joy, and in the bright days we sing, but the moment the clouds begin to gather the songs die upon our lips. The great mass of Christian people do not rejoice, do not sing.

If we would learn Nehemiah's lesson we would not only change our lives but would work a marvelous change in the world we live in. Indeed, a large part of regeneration is to become happy. Robert Louis Stevenson spoke truly when he said,

36 THE JOY OF THE LORD

“To be happy is the first step in being pious.” You have gone a long way toward saintliness when you have learned to laugh.

When you have fully mastered the lesson you will know the deepest joy when you are facing the storm. A vessel was crossing the sea from Germany, a winter or two ago, having on board a cargo of song birds. At first the air was soft and warm, and not a bird in all the thousands sang a note. After a few days a storm arose and the weather grew cold. Then one by one the birds began to sing, and soon all the thousands of sweet songsters on the vessel were singing as if their little throats would burst. When the joy of the Lord is in our hearts the wilder the storm, the fiercer the tempest, the more gladly do we sing.



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